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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version  
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Scharinger, J. (2013). Participatory theater, is it really? A critical examination of practices in Timor-Leste. *ASEAS - Austrian Journal of South-East Asian Studies*, 6(1), 102-119. <https://doi.org/10.4232/10.ASEAS-6.1-6>

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## Participatory Theater, Is It Really? A Critical Examination of Practices in Timor-Leste

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**Citation** Scharinger, J. (2013). Participatory theater, is it really? A critical examination of practices in Timor-Leste. *ASEAS - Austrian Journal of South-East Asian Studies*, 6(1), 102-119.

*Dance, music, and oral narratives are an important and vibrant part of cultural practice and heritage in Timor-Leste. But while Timorese people have used such creative methods and processes during rituals, celebrations, and their fight for independence, today arts and artistic expression become an increasingly popular strategy in development cooperation. Especially different forms of so-called participatory theater with origins in development cooperation, arts, and social movements, present themselves as innovative, participatory, and well applicable in terms of capacity building and stimulating positive social transformation. Based on the author's experience and observations, this article critically examines the alliance between various stakeholders in Timor-Leste engaging with the fact that the current scene of participatory theater can hardly be seen as an independent grassroots or even social movement, rather than an initiated top-down process by donors with specific agendas.*

**Keywords:** Development Cooperation; Empowerment; Participatory Theater; Social Change; Timor-Leste

*Tanz, Musik und mündliche Erzählungen sind ein wichtiger und dynamischer Teil der kulturellen Praxis und des kulturellen Erbes in Osttimor. Während TimoresInnen solche kreativen Methoden und Prozesse insbesondere in Ritualen, Feierlichkeiten und ihrem Unabhängigkeitskampf nutz(t)en, sind Kunst und künstlerische Ausdrucksformen heute eine zunehmend populäre Strategie in der Entwicklungszusammenarbeit geworden. Insbesondere unterschiedliche Formen des sogenannten partizipativen Theaters mit Ursprüngen in der Entwicklungszusammenarbeit, der Kunst und sozialen Bewegungen präsentieren sich als innovativ, inklusiv und gut anwendbar in Bezug auf capacity building und Stimulierung positiver sozialer Transformation. Aufbauend auf Erfahrungen und Beobachtungen der Autorin untersucht dieser Artikel die Allianz zwischen unterschiedlichen Stakeholdern in Osttimor vor dem Hintergrund, dass die derzeitige Szene des partizipativen Theaters kaum als unabhängige Grassroots- oder gar soziale Bewegung angesehen werden kann, sondern eher als ein von oben initiiertes Prozess von Geberinstitutionen mit spezifischen Vorstellungen.*

**Schlagworte:** Entwicklungszusammenarbeit; Empowerment; partizipatives Theater; sozialer Wandel; Osttimor

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## Introduction

Development projects and practitioners all around the world claim to use arts as participatory tool to engage people and communities in processes of creation and recreation to transform life and societies as well as strengthen peace and development (Sloman, 2011, p. 1). This is also the case in Timor-Leste – the youngest nation in South-East Asia with a long history of violence, conflict, and deprivation of basic rights and needs (Commission for Reception, Truth and Reconciliation in Timor-Leste [CAVR], 2005). Celebrating the 10th anniversary of independence last year, its second quite peaceful elections, and the withdrawal of the UN after a decade of almost ongoing presence, Timor-Leste is still struggling with coming to terms with its past. People and communities are divided and traumatized and while a small middle class is slowly emerging, the majority of people hardly benefit from the country's oil wealth and emerging economy – especially in rural areas (Scharinger, 2012).

As such, Timor-Leste seems to be a highly attractive field for a variety of development agencies and organizations and while some agencies focus on capacity building of high-level-ministries, others engage with local communities trying to stimulate positive social change in areas like peace, health, or women's empowerment. In the face of widespread illiteracy, difficult access to remote areas, widespread fragmentation, and ongoing conflicts and violence, more and more organizations adopt theater activities to spread their message and acknowledge arts' positive contribution to healing, reconciliation, and identity-building (Epskamp, 1984, p. 46). Moreover, participatory arts projects are widely perceived as being rather inexpensive and having desirable impacts on people's lives by forming relations to indigenous knowledge and cultural understanding. Exploring relations between important stakeholders in Timor-Leste mostly through participatory observation and critical analysis of performances and performing groups,<sup>2</sup> this paper acknowledges the challenging work and positive effects of participatory theater<sup>3</sup>, while specifically drawing attention to

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2 The author gained insights and experiences as a research student and theater practitioner working with a youth group in Dili, in 2011. Since late 2012, her activities focus less on practical application but rather on observing and analyzing different groups and activities within and outside development cooperation structures.

3 With terms like Theater for Development (TFD), Community Theater, Applied Theater, Popular Theater, Educational Theater, or Theater for Social Change, a vast amount of terminology was created and even though these terminologies show differences in appearance and appliance, all of them have the common basis of applying participatory methods of theater in non-conventional spaces with non-conventional actors and audience. Therefore, this paper uses the term *Participatory Theater* to cover the variety of participatory practices, which usually work outside the area of conventional theater.

critical and often contradictory applications and impacts. By adding perspectives of emerging and shifting paradigms and working methods of development cooperation (DC) to the analysis of participatory theater in Timor-Leste, I hope to gain a clearer understanding of such paradoxical applications.

### ***From Modernization to Participation in Development Cooperation***

In the 1950s and 1960s – the widely assumed ‘birth’ of development in theory and practice – the most preeminent development theory was the one of modernization and growth then adopted by most of the countries recently released into independence. Based on the US’ experience with investing in infrastructure and technology, development was solely defined as a single-linear and evolutionary process of economic growth with developed countries being just a few steps ahead of the colonial and post-colonial countries (Rostow, 1960).

Starting in the mid-1960s, however, it became more and more apparent that modernization and growth were not the only road to development. In fact, after a decade of focusing solely on modernizing society and stimulating infrastructure and economic growth, countries faced internal problems such as stagnation of economy, corruption, and fragmentation of society. Especially social scientists in Latin America related the problems of so-called underdeveloped countries to dependencies between countries and regions within the global world system (Cardoso & Faletto, 1979; Esteva, 1993). And even though they too did not manage fully and satisfactorily to explain the world and its dynamics, people started to question the very ideas and approaches of development per se. As can be seen with the emergence of the theory of post-development, this resulted in a deep and existential crisis of development in theory and practice (Ziai, 2007).

It was during this time, when former British colonial administrator and new post-colonial development practitioner Robert Chambers grew increasingly skeptical towards common top-down development approaches and undertook his first steps on a new path of participatory development. He argued that not NGOs or donor organizations should have the primary power in decision-making over development issues but rather the targeted communities themselves (Chambers, 1994). Though the

very concept of participation was not new at all – one need only to think about the Greek Acropolis or traditional community meetings – with this, Chambers managed to introduce the very concepts of participation, ownership, and empowerment into DC and its related scientific discourse. With DC being criticized as more and more ineffective, exclusive, and ignorant in terms of cultural and social structures and skills, participation seemed to be the best approach to overcome local and global challenges, backlashes, and critics (Chambers, 2004). Research presented the empowering and overall positive effects of such approaches, which were additionally viewed as fairly inexpensive and simple (Chambers, 1994). For example, theater was and is being celebrated as an ideal method of integrating stakeholders as holistic human beings into projects and empowering them to be their own “motors of change”:

*If development is understood as a process in which people's conditions – material, social, political or cultural – are changed, then theatre with its immense transformative potential seems to be an ideal form through which to explore a community's developmental aspirations and possibilities. (Prentki, 1998, p. 420)*

Accordingly, even initially criticized donors such as the World Bank adopted Chambers' participatory approaches and mainstreamed them into their agendas (Cornwall, 2008). As a result, a set of participatory and creative methods of community-based work – including theater – was developed or integrated into DC approaches and donor frameworks. Theater and development practitioners started to adopt participatory and often community-based approaches towards their own work and with the rise of the 1970s' social movements, links between arts and socio-political activism grew stronger and stronger (Boal, 2001).

With the rise of these social movements – promoting for example gender equality, environmental sustainability, democracy, or human rights – came major changes in socio-political spheres and discourses, which eventually also impacted the status of arts in society and arts itself. James Thompson and Richard Schechner (2004), for example, argue that until the 1960s and 1970s the “aesthetic” or conventional theater was dominant in Western countries and their colonial or post-colonial counterparts. Then, however “‘The theatre’ ceased to exist as a single entity” and many kinds of different theaters for different audiences and with specific social agendas emerged (Thompson & Schechner, pp. 11-12). Even though artists were at all times aware of the great space for reflection, analysis, criticism of mechanisms of power, and stimulation of social change that theater could offer – one need only to think about Shake-

Shakespeare or Brecht<sup>4</sup> –, in the 1970s, they started to incorporate education theorist Paulo Freire's approach of critical pedagogy in their theater (Freire, 1972). This approach attempted to liberate people and stimulate social transformation by engaging the audience into dialogue and valuing local and traditional knowledge. Theater practitioners all around the world realized that "only dialogue, which requires critical thinking, is also capable of generating critical thinking. Without dialogue, there is no communication, and without communication, there can be no true education" (Freire, p. 65). Consequently, they started to search for theater methods and approaches, which could overcome the barrier between theater and people to open up spaces for dialogue and interaction between actors and audience in order to encourage people's participation in arts, just like in their individual and social realities (cf. Ganguly, 2011). Moreover, especially artists in colonial and post-colonial countries aimed to liberate their theaters from influences of Western dramaturgy, approaches, and theatrical methods. By re-opening theater to a wide audience rather than only to those who could afford it and by returning to pre-colonial and participatory styles of theater, they sought to re-establish and remodel indigenous theater approaches and methods, which were meaningful in their country's socio-political situation (Boal, 2001; Prentki, 1998).

In such approaches, rather than delegating power to an imagined character or a single director, people are asked to identify issues of concerns and to imagine and discuss possible solutions. With *Forumtheater*, for example, famous inventor of *Theater of the Oppressed*, Augusto Boal, stages a play based on a community's concern and then asks this very community to engage in a creative process of envisioning and acting upon possible solutions themselves, eventually leading to a transformative process inspiring activism for social transformation and personal behavior change. With encouraging people from the audience to come up on stage and rewrite the script according to their envisioned solutions, they are not only engaged in a tremendously empowering and participatory moment, but also provided with a safe space to test and modify their ideas (Boal, 2002).

Most commonly, participatory theater groups are either asked to create a performance based on issues and concerns they explored together with members of communities, which will then be presented to the relevant communities along with

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4 Shakespearean and Brechtian theater are two well researched and discussed examples of how artists in different centuries have been able to utilize drama for the purposes of analyzing and challenging political power structures and social behavior (cf. Boal, 2001; Prentki, 2003).

discussions of possible solutions. Alternatively, facilitators of participatory theater work with the relevant communities themselves to identify issues of concern and create performances. Participatory theater, however, is not only used to express one's worries or challenges of life. Drawing from my own experience as Joker and actress, while usually the focus is put on the outcome of a project – in this case a performance – the process of engagement and creation of such a performance is just as important. For example, in working with victims of violence such a process can provide a safe space to explore and express their experiences and current situation, while also having positive effects on trauma-recovery such as identity-rebuilding, disruption of processes of isolation, reconnection of the physical, intellectual, and emotional self, or encouragement and empowerment to engage in social activism. Such plays are then rarely performed in traditional playhouses but rather staged on streets, public places, in traditional meeting spaces, schools, prisons, or other institutions, inviting an alternative and often spontaneous audience to watch.

### ***Cultural Practices in Timor-Leste***

Throughout the emergence of DC and participatory theater approaches, Timor-Leste was fighting to come into existence. Until the 1970s, the eastern part of Timor Island was a neglected colony of Portugal and when independence seemed to be within reach, Indonesian troops invaded their neighboring country in 1975, claiming it as Indonesian territory for more than 20 years. The Timorese resisted the Indonesian 'culturization' and tried to preserve their cultural identity and practices while also communicating secret messages amongst each other. As such, social dramas of rituals and community celebrations were an important and vibrant setting to preserve traditional songs, dances, and oral narratives, promoting the cultural identity of Timorese warrior clans and kingdoms (Dunphy, 2012, p. 187). At the same time, they were used in demonstrations and protests to promote the struggle for independence and self-determination. However, the period of the Indonesian occupation had a fundamental impact on the country's cultural heritage. With the aim of assimilating the Timorese traditional social fabric, community and traditional leaders and story tellers were a primary target of oppression and killing, should they refuse to collaborate

with the Indonesian forces (CAVR, 2005). Especially during the days of the invasion and the brutal genocide in 1999, much of the country's traditional infrastructure was destroyed together with thousands of people being killed (CAVR, 2005). With Timor-Leste being an oral society, much of its cultural heritage and practice was therefore lost within a short period of time, since people were not able to transmit their knowledge and powers to their successors.

After Indonesia withdrew in 1999, the country's cultural heritage was further endangered by socio-economic pressure and the vast amount of external influence as the UN and other international organizations established themselves on the ground. Fearing the loss of culture, Timorese artists and youth engaged – and were engaged by NGOs, governments, and international artists – in the preservation, but also recreation and reshaping of culture, history, and identity, eventually promoting peace and development (Dunphy, 2012). As a result, and often internationally supported, new arts initiatives such as the *Arte Moris Free Art School* (Living Art Free Art School) in the capital city of Dili, *Afalyca* (Wild People) in Baucau, or the *Lospalos Centre for Traditional and Contemporary Arts and Culture* came into existence. Incorporating various visual and fine arts forms, these initiatives combined traditional practices with elements of contemporary arts, further claiming on a positive impact in terms of trauma recovery, peace-building, and popular education.<sup>5</sup>

In- and outside such structures, in the past 10 years, a lot of more or less well-known theater groups arose and declined again all over the country. Well-known examples would be the Arte Moris performance group *Bibi Bulak* (Crazy goats, which stopped operating at the end of 2012), the *Sanggar Haburas* based in Lospalos, or the *Nafo Fila* in Ainaro.

The following examples and critical examination of participatory theater in relation to DC is mostly based upon experience and insights working with or observing theater projects and groups in Dili, directly placed within the structures of NGOs, while at the same time also being hired by other NGOs for advocacy purposes.

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5 Cf. Arte Moris' website: [www.artemoris.org](http://www.artemoris.org);  
<http://www.whitehorse.vic.gov.au/IgnitionSuite/uploads/docs/Afalyca%20Flier%202.pdf>;  
[http://manyhands.org.au/our\\_activities/lospalos\\_centre\\_for\\_traditional\\_and\\_contemporary\\_arts\\_and\\_culture](http://manyhands.org.au/our_activities/lospalos_centre_for_traditional_and_contemporary_arts_and_culture)



### ***The Reality of Practice in Participatory Theater***

While participatory theater in theory is a process led by, with, and for communities, in the Timorese reality it is often a process initiated and guided by external, non-artistic actors within local or global DC structures. This makes not only sustainability and effectiveness questionable but also results in donor-driven agendas and practices (Etherton & Prentki, 2006; Sloman, 2011). A detailed exploration of the involved actors reveals the hierarchy between stakeholders and messages sent to each other. Therefore, it can provide insights on the gorge between theory and reality of participatory theater as applied in Timor-Leste.

#### ***When the Donor Writes the Script***

When donors such as international organizations (IOs) or NGOs approach theater groups and provide funding in exchange for a play based on a specific topic, artists often find limitations, regulations, and stereotypes that weaken autonomous creative exploration, expression, and overall political dynamics such groups could have or develop. Oftentimes, actors explore issues in and with communities and engage in a series of briefings and discussions with respective donor organizations. However, when it comes to scripting the play, the donors show a lack of trust and value in the group's knowledge and skills. This problem can be seen with the preparation of a theater play in Dili. Asked to create a play about gender equality and women's empowerment, a theater group consisting of young and inspired actors committed to promote change and transformation of their society, examined living situations in nearby communities and engaged with national and international standards and human rights. After this research process, they created a humorous script with the main female character aiming to run for president at the next elections and facing numerous challenges before she can do so. The donors, however, had a very different idea of how this topic should be approached. Within a few meetings and review sessions of the developed script, the groups' ideas were completely overturned, and the emerging play showed a traditional family arguing over who was to do the dishes. The donors firmly controlled the content and performance, highlighting that some political spheres should better remain untouched and unchallenged. Additionally, their tremendous interference showed that their message and its promotion were

the chief concerns, whereas creative and aesthetic dimensions together with appreciation of the theater groups' ideas and practices were irrelevant.

Technical experts sent to review and reshape scripts often lack experience in script-writing, theater, or engaging in the indigenous creative thought process in a participatory and respectful way. As a consequence, the resulting scripts lack aesthetic quality, cultural relevance, political linkages, or simply factors of entertainment. Moreover, such scripts reflect donors' attitudes of superiority and their ideas of theater being a fairly inexpensive way to educate people and communicate messages in the face of lack of infrastructure. Prentki (2003) makes these consequences clear:

*As long as a development process leaves the affective aspects of human beings out of account, it will never succeed in facilitating changes of attitude and behavior. People may pay lip-service to transformational goals but in their hearts they will remain untouched and unreconstructed. (p. 41)*

Furthermore, controlling processes of exploring and expressing individual and social realities within a public space in Timor-Leste sends a very concerning message to a population, which is part of a transition process from an oppressed nation during Indonesian occupation to an independent democratic state. It is vital to mention here that, until today, most Timorese are growing up and being educated in a style which does not encourage critical reflection, analytical skills, or freedom of expression, but rather obedience to authority. Tightly controlling a presumably creative and critical process creates another authoritarian space where Timorese are not able to acquire knowledge and skills regarding democratic citizenship and creative and peaceful self-expression. This problem has also been encountered within theater groups outside of Timor-Leste. Reflecting upon Forumtheater and its potential influence on democracy in India, director and founder of famous forumtheater group *Jana Sanskriti*, Sanjoy Ganguly, shows the challenge of developing political citizenship in a context where NGOs – just like politicians – aim to use arts for their “publicity machinery” (Ganguly, 2011, pp. 62-63). In such cases, theater becomes another mode of “one-way communication”, where the message is worked out beforehand and the sole role of theater is to “persuade people to adopt the new practice or participate in a certain program” (Kidd, 1984, p. 270).

Reports and evaluations following such top-down-approaches consequently show the same lack of incitement and sensitivity to people's actual needs. As Etherton and Prentki (2006) point out, the very definition of impact and transformation is not

neutral, and especially NGOs working on a project-basis do not have the means or mechanisms to evaluate any long-term effects and sustainability (pp. 140-141). While in reports and evaluation, participatory theater is often stated to be efficient, effective, and sustainable, the focus rests more on numbers of performances, participants, and audience rather than on generating comprehensive and meaningful data:

*The impact of such theatre cannot be quantified in terms of numbers. Certainly the numbers define the outreach statistically, but it is often difficult to gauge what effect it has on the minds of audience members whose values may be engrained in their minds owing to hundreds of years of tradition. (Mundrawala, 2007, p. 160)*

In reality, the very methods of acquiring knowledge regarding sustainable and transformative impacts on behavior change need to be critically examined. For example, a theater group based in Dili was hired by an NGO to create a performance to promote conflict transformation skills and tour throughout the country. Within two weeks, they performed in 11 of the 13 districts of Timor-Leste. Yet, their only evaluation tool was pre- and post-surveys handed out to a small percentage of the audience before and after the performance with questions such as “How many tools of conflict prevention do you know?” as a pre-survey-question and “Have you learned about tools for conflict prevention while watching the performance?” as part of the post-survey. Such questions, however, can by no means be any indication of a decreased use of violence or appearance of conflicts, nor can they indicate long-lasting and sustainable transformation of conflicts or personal behavior. In the given example, the group dropped in and out of communities, performing almost every night in another community. They did not have time to actually engage with their audience and learn about their problems, leaving their play to nothing more than a commercial against conflict and violence

However, it is not only communities or the audience who experience a drop-in and -out of donors but also participants in theater projects themselves: For example, identifying school-drop-outs in various communities in Dili and involving them in theater and social activism in order to prevent them from being engaged in gangs and violent behavior can be a great project with great outcomes. The youth indeed receive an alternative tool for expression to ease their anger and frustration, they feel empowered and important within their community, and are included in a regular, stable, supportive, and yet challenging environment. In following youth who engage in

such projects, it is a wonderful experience for me to observe the transformative and empowering processes stimulated by such projects. However, it is a cause for concern that after a certain period of time, the project finishes or enters another stage, incorporating other youth without providing adequate care and alternative means of expression and engagement for the previous participants. Worried about the negative effects on their former participants' well-being and sustainable positive development, facilitators often spend their spare time to meet and mentor them rather than just let them down. However, as admirable their efforts are, facilitators risk an overload by trying to keep a project or project-cycle alive, which was abandoned by its donors in order to search for new numbers of participants and performances for their reports.

### *Top-Down Approaches*

It seems to be a universal challenge for urban theater groups with members educated in a conservative development and education philosophy not to enter communities "as empty vessels to be filled with the knowledge by the teacher" (Odhiambo, 2005, p. 195). For example, Odhiambo gives a shocking account on how theater for development practitioners in Kenya are influenced by a sense of superiority due to their university education while at the same time stating that they are not aware of any philosophy or ideology which defines and characterizes their practice (p. 195). Similar experiences can be heard from theater researcher Syed Jamil Ahmed (2002): "There is no in-depth analysis of the complexities of life, because, as the development workers often explain, 'the villagers will not understand it'" (p. 212).

Observing participatory theater in Timor-Leste, I find that after experiencing a top-down script writing process, with scripts being hardly designed for or with communities but rather to please specific interests of donors, there is a high risk that such top-down experiences are reflected into scripts and performances themselves. Such attitudes and approaches can exacerbate the situation to such an extent that the created play will show severe signs of stereotyping and patronizing traditional culture and elements of society. Accordingly, as Annie Sloman (2011) who worked with different theater groups in Timor-Leste for several years describes, theater groups often enter "a community and dogmatically [tell] the people how they should change their lives" (p. 4).

Just like “Mr. Wise and Mr. Foolish”, traditional characters are displayed as stupid, ignorant, and violent. They can only be saved by modern characters – often richer and more educated relatives – who suddenly appear for a visit and explain mistakes and solutions to the foolish traditional opponent. Without any further discussion, the foolish traditional relatives understand and vow to change. However, “the complexity of people’s lives, of definitions of what constitutes empowerment and transformation, of the ethics of an artist’s involvement in social transformation and of what an arts project can offer, suggest no quick fix” (Houston, 2005, p. 167). In fact, performances directed in such a short-minded sense cannot have any deeper impact on people’s lives. Not only that people refuse to identify with the stupid, ignorant, and violent “Mr. Foolish”; such performances can only scratch the surface of the perceived problems and therefore present a very limited and short-framed solution. Ignoring the fact that behavioral change or social transformation often consists of a challenging long-term struggle, the audience is provided with the idea that it just takes a few minutes of basic explanation to change people’s perceptions, behavior, and life. Prentki (1998), however, points out that “especially when working with groups who have long social and cultural histories of oppression and silence, it is unreasonable to expect the TFD process to be implemented rapidly” (p. 421). Additionally, micro-issues and macro-issues cannot be linked and questions of power and accountability remain untouched – what seems especially the case when international or national organizations fund the performances (Kerr, 1991, p. 66).

The audience becomes a simple receiver of the funding agency’s message and power asymmetries remain unchallenged. For example, displaying a violent husband on stage and teaching him to count from one to ten to regulate his anger does not touch underlying problems of domestic violence, perceptions of power, manliness, or failures of the political system to protect victims from any harm. Similarly, performing a play, which encourages people to eat at least five colors per day cannot have any impact as long as people lack access to different kinds of food or crops; not even speaking about topics such as global food dependency or cultural perceptions of richness and poverty.

Theater groups and donors performing in such a way hardly understand that in order to stimulate the very beginning of transformation of thought and behavior – which itself is never to be guaranteed and certainly not completed after watching a

single performance – it needs a creative process and interaction between actor and audience (Ganguly, 2011, p. 77). In a hierarchical relationship based on assumptions about the ‘Other’ and a feeling of superiority, empathy, mutual respect, and understanding are hardly to be found. This idea is exemplified by Augusto Boal’s approach that opposes educational, didactical, or propaganda theater in which lessons are simply being delivered to the audience. Theater to him is a dialogue and a process of learning together. Arts in this sense means the integration of thought, words, and action, otherwise such performances present just another package of development propaganda with participation, empowerment, ownership, and sustainability only being found in project proposals (Ganguly, 2011, p. 117).

### *The Critical Role of the Facilitator*

As can be seen in the preceding critique, a great part of responsibility rests with the theater groups and facilitators. As Sloman (2011, p. 15) describes, facilitators need to be multi-skilled “agents of change”, who are able to negotiate between different interest groups, facilitate creative and participatory processes, provide inspiring and encouraging leadership, engage in ongoing and critical self-reflection, and ideally have skills in finance, administration, and project management. They should be independent, with in-depth knowledge of their working context and possess cultural sensitivity and language skills.

This is hardly the case in Timor-Leste, where groups are often set up, run, and/or funded by NGOs with international facilitators who come into the country for mostly a short period of time and work or perform for different communities with different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Many groups face conditions, time and other limitations due to both the funding proposals and donors’ agendas, which hardly allow creative exploration and meaningful participation of the ‘real’ stakeholders in terms of agenda setting. If donors for example would expect a performance on youth violence in the streets, whereas the youth engaged are much more interested in the limited access and quality to formal education, the facilitator faces a quandary. If he or she engages with the youth, takes their concerns seriously, and opens up channels to express their grievances, the possible consequence is that donors and employers terminate contracts and funding due to unfulfilled requirements. This will not only

harm the employing NGO and restrict its future access to funding, but also the youth who will be left in the middle of an important process of exploring and expressing grievances in non-violent, but creative ways. If, on the other hand, the facilitator decides to stick to the initial proposal and topic, he or she risks that the project and its activities will lack relevance in the eyes of the youth.

Discussions about who makes the best facilitator are still ongoing; some argue that it is the well-established and experienced facilitators who enjoy greater creative freedom and less dependency on funding mechanisms; others argue that it is especially those well-established and experienced facilitators who become extremely self-confident and authoritarian rather than participatory and empowering. Participating in such a Theater of the Oppressed-Workshop myself, I was astonished by how much the incoming facilitator attempted to streamline her own work-experience with her theater group into a totally different context and how ignorant she was towards the participants' experiences, interests, and aims.

Nevertheless, younger and less-established facilitators show similar weaknesses. In Timor-Leste, it is especially these younger and enthusiastic so-called 'volunteers' or 'youth ambassadors' who are placed within different NGOs and settings and take responsibility for theater groups and projects. These volunteers hardly have a background in Development Studies or Participatory Theater but, if so, more often in Theater Management or Fine Arts. This often means that performances and the methods of creating them seem more or less like streamlined Western theater as the new facilitators are used to from their native countries (Lee, 1978, p. 79). Overstrained and overwhelmed, they hardly have time to do adequate research – neither about methods and ideas of participatory theater nor about communities' perceptions and problems. As a consequence, they barely reflect upon their own ideas and approaches, in order to adapt them to new contexts and the challenges they face. Already being integrated in DC structures, they are not only at risk but moreover “a compliant tool of Northern development agencies” (Kerr, 1991, p. 71). As a result, they tend to reinforce hierarchies and stereotypes, not only in their work with theater groups but also in performances. Instead of enabling actors and communities to explore and express themselves, they tend to control creative processes and outcomes. But, in a country like Timor-Leste, where stereotypes about the “uneducated and unskilled Timorese” are widely shared amongst international development practitioners, trans-



ferring leadership and capacity to local stakeholders is meant to be a necessity, and yet often remains an untouched sphere.

The worst example observed in such a context was a European Master's candidate conducting research for her thesis and volunteering with a local NGO in Dili. Twice a week she would join Timorese facilitators for their theater classes. While the NGO had offered three-month cycles of theater classes for disaffected and marginalized youth, who were often perpetrators or victims of violence, for approximately a year, it was the first cycle in which two Timorese facilitators were given the opportunity and responsibility to handle these classes without international facilitators. Within a cycle of three months, the actors should acquire knowledge in different theater methods and explore issues important to them and their communities. Afterwards, together with the facilitators, they would create a performance based on these issues and do show-cases in their communities. The newly incoming international volunteer was asked to join the classes, observe the facilitators' performance, and provide ideas and mentoring, based on her own theater experience after the classes. However, soon she would not only enter the stage as a facilitator but also as an actor. She would more or less create lesson plans for the facilitators and step in to show the youth how to act 'her way'. As a result, both, facilitators and actors felt increasingly intimidated and did not come up with ideas for performances themselves. Facing time pressure, facilitators would use scenes from past projects, while the international volunteer would create more scenes. As a result, the actors were increasingly alienated by the planned performance. Showing a scene about the empowerment of women, for example, the girls refused to participate because they felt shy dancing to pop music in front of an audience. Showing another scene about domestic violence, the male actors acting as husbands did not understand the basic message of the scene and acted more and more violent stimulated by a laughing audience who – accordingly to Timorese social behavior – expressed discomfort and distress with laughter.

James Thompson and Richard Schechner (2004, p. 15) describe the positive processes and impacts theater can have in post-conflict contexts: With making themselves heard instead of being silenced, victims of violence re-gain action and power over their own lives, what proves to be a highly important process in trauma-healing and recovery. Furthermore, in enabling communities to come and work together to understand their past and to move forward while also providing time for joy, relief,



and entertainment, new bonds between people are created and the social fabric can re-emerge. With Timor-Leste being a post-conflict country with high levels of violence in homes and on the streets, theater projects engaging young victims and perpetrators of conflict and violence seem to be very popular, but hardly include people with any background in psychology or drama-therapy (Dunphy, 2012, p. 191). In terms of the *do no harm*-approach, this is highly concerning. Instead of trauma-recovery, empowerment, community-building, or transformation, inexperienced and unskilled facilitators and projects put great risk on actors and audience in terms of re-traumatization, re-victimization, and reinforcement of social stereotypes.

## Conclusion

As this critical examination of ongoing theater activities shows, the current scene of participatory theater in Timor-Leste can hardly be seen as an independent grassroots movement. Originating within a mix of DC, arts, and social movements, it has widely abandoned its relations to arts and social movements and solely follows the premises of DC and its inherent power and economic structures. Hence, what Ahmed (2002) states in the case of Bangladesh is also applicable in Timor-Leste:

*At the field level, the NGOs, not the people, determine the issues. . . . In turn, the issues of the NGOs are determined by the donors' agenda, where the 'larger' have some bargaining power but the 'smaller' have none. Hence, at the end of the day, whatever their vision, mission or goal, they are geared to fulfilling the donors' agendas. At the 'globalised' level, the donors' agendas are determined by the interest of multinational capital. (p. 215)*

Integrated in structures of DC, theater practitioners seem to become part of a mainstreamed cultural framework defined by major political actors who are apparently still operating under the premises of top-down approaches of Western modernization theory, while hiding under the disguise of participatory approaches. As such, participatory theater has become another tool and label which legitimizes projects claiming to achieve empowerment and ownership of marginalized groups. Once believed to be the way out of top-down approaches, cultural insensitivity, and mainstreamed economic development, participatory theater today serves hegemonic interests and mass development. Ostensively, participatory tools are integrated in donors' approaches and frameworks without being sensitive to stakeholders' needs and

wants. By only adopting the techniques of participatory theater rather than the full set of ethics, methods, and approaches, donors manage to take an originally critical and challenging approach and include it into a hierarchy that depends on the acquisition of further funding and is therefore less able to critically examine and challenge power mechanisms and structures which compromise donors' agendas, interests, or even reputation (Faschingeder, 2011, p. 21). As such, participatory theater has in many cases lost its original link to the social movements of the 1970s and lacks ethical, political, and aesthetical quality. Furthermore, just like Cooke and Kothari (2001) criticize that participation has degenerated to a "tyrannical power" oppressing the already poor and marginalized, participatory theater shows a similar potential. This seems even more dangerous, since it inherits the Western romanticist idea of arts being initially "good" and "transformative" in and of themselves. As a consequence, participatory theater is at risk, not only of becoming just another meaningless buzzword of DC, but rather of being turned around to defeat its own purpose of liberating and empowering marginalized people.

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